

Islamic Cultural Sensitivity in the Marine Corps  
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to  
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The United States Marine Corps must shift its approach to counter insurgency because Iraq is an increasing secular society, Marines are hypersensitive to Islamic cultures, and insurgents are exploiting this cultural sensitivity. Over-emphasizing strict avoidance of the most subtle cultural offense has degraded Marine operations in Iraq and is hindering the already-grudgingly slow rate of progress made since the war began. A more accurate depiction of Islamic culture in Iraq would reveal the importance of Marines establishing dominance. The unique operating environment of the three block war challenging the Marine Corps today is increasingly convoluted. While the nation has established and reestablished its diplomacy and operating parameters, its current counter-insurgency doctrine remains flawed. The focus that has been placed on the operators' familiarity with the Islamic culture is unquestionably relevant. However, over-emphasizing sensitivity towards Muslims in combination with devaluing killing the enemy has resulted in the perception of ground forces being weak, easily manipulated, and hesitant.

### **Background**

The stark contrast between current Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) deployments and the Support and Security Operations (SASO)

phase that occurred immediately after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is readily apparent. The due-credibility and respect deserved by Marines from Iraqis is no longer existant. After looking at how the Marine Corps prepares its combat forces during predeployment workup, to include the extensive Mojave Viper package with respect to culture familiarization, it is apparent why Marines are experiencing such slow progress in Iraq. The Corps as a whole is simply paranoid of offending Muslims. Leadership within the Corps is not stressing to Marines the importance of establishing dominance within Iraqi society.

### **Iraqi secular society**

The United States Marine Corps must shift its approach to COIN because Iraq is an overwhelmingly moderate and increasingly secular society in comparison to neighboring Muslim countries. Findings from a December 2004 to March 2007 survey indicate that Iraqi political values are much more centered on nationalism and non-secular government than previously experienced. The number of Iraqis surveyed roughly represented the actual fractions of Shia's, Sunnis, and Kurds presently living in Iraq. The survey results indicate that an increase from twenty-four percent to a third of the population over the three year period was in favor of

a separation between religion and politics.<sup>1</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, a sociologist with Eastern Michigan University, captures this increase in secularism when he states, "Iraqis have a strong sense of national identity that transcends religious and political lines...the recent out-pouring of national pride at the Asian Cup victory of the Iraqi soccer team showed that this sense of national pride remains strong..."<sup>2</sup>

Marines deployed to Iraq have witnessed first hand the hypocrisy of Islamic culture. Whether it be the unspoken alcohol market, infatuation and curiosity with Western culture, or an unwillingness to accept responsibility for undesirable actions conveniently credited to "God's Will", the fact remains that the emphasis placed on Islamic religion in Iraq by the Marine Corps leadership is not consistent with the actual religious dynamics experienced by Marines on the ground. Further illustrating the hypocrisy and true essence of Iraqi culture is seen when an Iraqi interpreter states that "Iraqi men go to the bad houses (prostitution houses) to feed their sexual appetite, and that this activity is more or less condoned but not discussed...and was in fact representative opinion held throughout the Iraqi social

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Swanbrow, Accessed 13 December 2007

<sup>2</sup> Diane Swanbrow, Accessed 13 December 2007

structure."<sup>3</sup> Yet the Marine Corps still jeopardizes operational success in order to avoid committing any subtle cultural offenses.

### **Islamic Hypersensitivity**

The Marine Corps must shift its approach to COIN because Islamic hypersensitivity is placing Marines' safety and operational effectiveness in jeopardy. The potential ramifications of this cultural double standard are best highlighted in the following statement, "And, given the governing principle of multicultural society-that Western man demonstrates his cultural sensitivity by preemptively surrendering-it seems that any savvy islamist...might be contemplating the benefits of a twin-track strategy."<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Western phenomenon of political Islamic hypersensitivity and the avoidance of cultural confrontation at all costs has rapidly trickled down through the Marine Corps and to the troops operating at the tactical level within Iraq. Marines are becoming dangerously accustomed to Islamic hypersensitivity to the point that U.S.P.S postal bulletin PB22097, section E2,

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<sup>3</sup> Sentinel47, Accessed 13 December 2007

<sup>4</sup> Mark Steyn, Accessed 12 December 2007

prohibits Bibles from being sent due to the fact that Bibles contain matter "contrary to the Islamic faith."<sup>5</sup>

A look at the Mojave Viper training package illustrates how cultural hypersensitivity is border-line brain washing of young Marines. As a rifle squad from 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment conducted training during the summer of 2006, the squad leader was constantly debriefed by leadership on his lack of cultural awareness. In one instance, the Marine instructor claimed the squad leader should have refrained from entering an Iraqi's house abruptly despite the prevalent sniper threat. Furthermore, the phrase "Power doesn't work with the Iraqi people" was stated during the instructor's critique; nevermind the obvious irony since Saddam Hussein maintained order for decades through brute displays of power! The instructor's debrief further criticizes the squad for detaining three men as it could be perceived as unnecessary public humiliation. This criticism ignores the fact that detaining Iraqi males regularly produces sources and exposes insurgents. Also, three local national males congregating in the street moments after an attack and behaving suspiciously warrants cautious measures. The instructor continued to encourage further hesitancy by suggesting the possibility of a car advancing past a trigger line because an Iraqi was trying to get his pregnant wife

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<sup>5</sup>Michelle Malkin, Accessed 13 December 2007

to the hospital. The Marine instructor even goes on to state that over a twelve-month period only sixty Iraqis killed out of a thousand were confirmed to be insurgents.<sup>6</sup> This completely ignores the fact that Iraqis have had years to familiarize themselves with driving procedures around coalition forces or the possibility that insurgents might be probing coalition defenses. The hard truth is that this type of over-dramatic training degrades a Marine's confidence to act appropriately in difficult circumstances.

Boldness and decisive military action is what Iraqis respect, and this is the recipe for success in a counterinsurgency.<sup>7</sup> Multiple debriefs of returning Marines and Soldiers reinforce the fact that establishing dominance is the first critical step to successful COIN operations. As plainly outlined by a Soldier returning from his second tour in Iraq with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, "...the enemy repeated his attack patterns until he was made to pay in blood for his deeds."<sup>8</sup> The discourse goes on to stress the necessity of dominating the battlespace by killing insurgents before attempting to build infrastructure in Mosul and Tal Afar. The necessity of establishing dominance in Iraq is rapidly being abandoned; thus, the Marine Corps must minimize Islamic hypersensitivity in Marine Corps training.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Palmer, Accessed 13 December 2007

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Peters, Accessed 13 December 2007

<sup>8</sup> Chris Gibson, Accessed 13 December 2007



## **Insurgent Exploitation**

Given the misunderstood Iraqi culture and the hypersensitivity that is infecting current Counterinsurgency doctrine, it is no surprise what advantages this gives the enemy. Capitalizing on this readily apparent gap, insurgents in Iraq have and continue to utilize the Islamic faith to further their efforts to undermine coalition forces. In November of 2004, Marines and Iraqi soldiers discovered a large cache of weapons in a mosque that was being used as a safe haven in Fallujah.<sup>9</sup> In July 2007, after receiving fire from the Houda Mosque in Hor Al Bosh, an Iraqi male was detained and a weapons cache was confiscated by Iraqi forces. Like other numerous accounts throughout Iraq, the insurgents were capitalizing on the coalition's inability to enter mosques on both occasions. Only after the Iraqi Army demonstrated williness to cooperate could the mosques be searched.<sup>10</sup>

Another illustration of insurgent exploitation of Marine cultural sensitivities occurred when a Marine pilot made the following statement regarding fighting in an Iraqi cemetery during August of 2004, "We had been warned that it was an 'exclusion

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<sup>9</sup>Robert F. Worth, Accessed 12 December 2007

<sup>10</sup>1<sup>st</sup> BCT, 1<sup>st</sup> Cav. Div. Public Affairs. Multi-National Corps - Iraq, Accessed 13 December 2007

zone' when we got there, that the local authorities had asked us to not go there or fly overhead, even though we knew the bad guys were using the area to hide weapons, make improvised explosive devices, and plan against us. Being the culturally sensitive force we are, we agreed. Suddenly, I was conducting support missions over the Marines' heads in the graveyard, dodging anti-aircraft artillery and rocket-propelled grenades and preparing to be shot down."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, insurgents exploit Marines' hesitancy to target, suspect, or even make eye contact with Iraqi females. As a result and just weeks apart, female suicide bombers attacked coalition forces in Diyala Province on two separate occasions in November and December of 2007.<sup>12</sup> Attacks like these expose the vulnerability of sensitivity-trained Marines and illuminate the need for an aggressive and dominate troop posture.

### **Counterargument**

Some feel that Islamic hypersensitivity is a problem that extends beyond the control of the Marine Corps. Although operational constraints in Iraq resulting from Islamic hypersensitivity severely hinder military goals, it is argued that the

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<sup>11</sup> Glen Butler, Accessed 12 December 2007

<sup>12</sup> Associated Press, Accessed 13 December 2007

problem is political and that the majority of it extends beyond the direct control of the Marine Corps.

Others argue that the newly revised Counterinsurgency Field Manual and implementation of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) is proof that the Marine Corps has already identified and alleviated its COIN shortcomings. They claim that the current COIN Manual is an admittance of failings of former COIN doctrine by the Army and Marine Corps and is an improvement in that it "admits the existence of religious zealots and ethnic demagogues—salient insurgent types the previous draft ignored—and accepts that some enemies are irreconcilable and must be killed."<sup>13</sup> It is also argued that the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program highlights the fact that issues such as winning the hearts and minds and respect for culture and religious beliefs are not always reconcilable differences.<sup>14</sup> Finally, some already claim that Iraq is a success due to the recent stability in Al-Anbar and decline in number of attacks on Marines in theater.

### **Conclusion**

The United States Marine Corps must shift its approach to counter insurgency because Iraq is an increasing secular society,

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<sup>13</sup> Ralph Peters, Accessed 13 December 2007

<sup>14</sup> Jack E. Hoban, Accessed 12 December 2007

Marines are hypersensitive to Islamic cultures, and insurgents are exploiting this cultural sensitivity. The Marine Corps needs to alter the way it conducts counterinsurgency operations in Iraq by divorcing itself from the Islamic cultural hysteria that is plaguing combat operations. An over-emphasis on cultural sensitivity has allowed the enemy to set the terms and conditions on the battlefield in Iraq. Cultural awareness does not equate cultural sensitivity. Marine culture, refined over centuries and time-tested, has fared well with honorable aggressiveness on the battlefield. Suppressing it to comply with a ridiculous standard that demands unreasonable precision in a convoluted three block war like Iraq is unattainable. Dominance is the catalyst for success in Iraq, and "violence is the currency that pays the serious bills."<sup>15</sup>

WORD COUNT 2,219

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Peters, Accessed 13 December 2007

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